

Foreword

A map of the United States showing the routes of its current and bygone railroads gives the impression of a large quilt stitched together by the universal symbol of the railroad track. Indeed, this impression is not far from reality. American history is interwoven with and bound to the history of its railroads. It is a history of growth and change, manifest destiny and financial scandals, the desire to improve the quality of life and a reckless disregard for lifeways destroyed. To some it is the epic tale of transcontinental travel reduced from several grueling months overland to several days on the iron trail, the trip perhaps made memorable by stunning scenery, fresh-faced Harvey girls, and glimpses of the sooty workers who made it all possible. To others, it meant cheaper transport of natural resources that once seemed boundless, the scarring of unvalued pristine landscapes, or the desecration of sacred ground. It is also synonymous with the characters who peopled it. Notorious tycoons financed the lines, reveled in competition with their rivals, and, in many cases, have justly taken their place in the gallery of America's greatest scoundrels. At the same time, often nameless immigrants—Irish, Chinese, German, Greek, and others—along with America's Civil War veterans, Mormons, American Indians, and former slaves, made the tycoon's vision real. Over a history at once glorious and shameful but never colorless, railroads have moved soldiers and vacationers, catalog houses and furnishings, commuters and hobos, circus animals and livestock, sugar cane and parlor organs. They attracted and exploited America's newest citizens; misled settlers; created, named and abandoned towns; and brought loved ones home for the holidays. They opened a new world to the many Americans who had never been more than a day's travel from home.

Today, American railroad history is preserved in myriad ways across the land, as scores of federal, state, local and private sites—including more than a dozen units of the National Park System—concern themselves with the subject. This issue of CRM highlights some of the most notable ongoing efforts to research, compile, synthesize, analyze, preserve, and interpret the history of railroads in America. From Maine to Florida and across the West, to Alaska and even Hawaii, railroads have touched every part of the nation, for better or for worse. Their presence and impact are always before us.

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